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RELIGIOUS FOLK ART OF THE SOUTHWEST

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Religious Folk Art of the Southwest

The current exhibition of religious sculpture and painting by frontier artists of Spanish descent is an acknowledgment of the growing appreciation of this isolated and remarkably productive folk culture which flourished in the farming communities of New Mexico during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Most of the work shown was selected from the outstanding collection of Spanish-American art in the Taylor Museum of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, whose curator, Mitchell A. Wilder, prepared the exhibition.* Miss Dorothy C. Miller, who directed the Museum showing, has supplemented the older material with a group of twentieth-century woodcarvings by two New Mexican artists working in a similar tradition.

This most important Christian art produced within the boundaries of the United States is an indirect consequence of a disappointing colonial enterprise of the Spanish crown. Failing to find in New Mexico the fabulously rich, legendary cities which it had expected, the Spanish government was at last content to maintain this bleak outpost of the empire primarily as a missionary venture. The colonists who settled in the mountains and river valleys in the early eighteenth century received little from the Spanish government beyond the initial grant of their lands. But, sustained by an immovable religious faith and a peasant tenacity, they and their descendants held to their farms in desperate poverty through Indian raids, floods and crop failures, despite the indif-

ference of three successive governments—Spain, Mexico and the United States. Through the years they developed a proud material and spiritual self-sufficiency, from which this religious folk art derives both its energy and its quiet conviction.

During the colonial period supply trains came from Mexico only once in three years. Even then most of the goods was earmarked for mission construction and distribution among the Indian converts. Survival and subsistence for the colonists depended upon resourcefulness and manual invention. Since nails, metals and even the simplest tools were rare, they learned to build their homes and churches, weave their own cloth and cultivate the soil with materials available in the region.

In this primitive society where "Adam delved and Eve span" highly specialized division of labor was nonexistent, but there were many jacks of all trades. It was in this simple versatile craft practice that the *santero* (maker of saints), as the local artist was called, received his training. Even the cheapest religious print imported from Mexico or Spain was beyond the purse of the Spanish-American farmer. But the *santero*, going from village to village, supplied religious images for church or home by barter or at a fee scaled to the local standard of living.

Religious prints or an occasional imported sculpture or painting supplied the initial repertoire of types for the religious artisans. As these copies were in turn duplicated and became common knowledge, both formal and expressive qualities were adapted to the plain craftsmanship and fervent, simple-hearted

* These exhibition notes were prepared largely from material supplied the Museum by Mr. Wilder.



El Señor (Crucifixion), 23½ by 14¾ inches.

devotion of frontier society. The *bultos* (figures in the round) were carved of cottonwood from the river banks, the same material used to make the colonial pitchforks, hoes and cartwheels. Instead of being hewn from a solid block, they were usually carved in separate pieces and assembled carpenter-fashion with the same ingenious joinery employed on the local plow (see *The Chariot of Death*, p. 6, and José Dolores López, *The Garden of Eden*, p. 10). Limitations of tools and materials were often overcome by improvisation, such as the use of gesso to model

drapery. Sometimes plaster-soaked cloth was stretched over a wood frame to form the contemporary bell-shaped skirt for a Virgin (see *Our Lady of Sorrows*, p. 9). Locally prepared colors made from berries, herbs and minerals of the region supplied glowing reds, fine transparent yellows, and blues and greens of admirable freshness. In both the *bultos* and the *retablos* (painted panels) these colors frequently appear in subtle combinations and unexpected expressive contexts.

For many years the only religious order in New Mexico was the Franciscans. Though their chief concern was the conversion of the Indians, they also served as priests to the colonists. The Franciscan ideal — the imitation of the life of Christ — took a deep hold on the imagination and feelings of the colonists. Many of them joined the Franciscan lay order, the Penitente Brothers, as these lay societies came to be known locally, and it was to these zealous, devout laymen that the religious leadership of the community eventually passed when the friars were withdrawn from the missions in the early nineteenth century. The art of the *santero* then became more indispensable than ever. For though the frontiersmen were deprived of earthly representatives of the Church, the *bultos* and *retablos* on the altars of their churches and in their homes provided tangible assurance of the spiritual presence of the Holy Trinity and the continuing protection and intercession of the family of saints.

In many districts there was no longer anyone qualified to baptize, confirm, marry, administer the Eucharist or Supreme Unction. Penance, the sacrament which provides the most direct, active participation of the worshipper, naturally assumed a great importance. Self-scourging, which had long been practiced in the region, became the chief mode of devotion among the Penitentes. In

this rigorous, fanatical act of penance there was an ever-present analogy to the scourging of Christ. Sometimes the imitation of the Passion extended to the bearing of gigantic crosses, and occasionally the actual crucifixion (by binding) of one of the brethren.



Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe), 21¾ inches high.

The *santero* in his images of the Man of Sorrows (see pp. 2 and 7) and the Crucifixion could often draw upon his own actual experience of physical torment. It is perhaps this intense, literal, re-enacting, religious imagination which gives the best and even the most formalized of these figures their expressive eloquence and power, whatever their indebtedness to traditional models. In these Penitente *bultos*, made in an isolated region of a predominantly Protestant country, we may well have the last expression of a great European tradition of hysterical religious sensibility which extends from the late Gothic art of France and Germany to baroque Spain, and includes the German, Matthias Gruenewald, as well as the Spaniard, Montañés.

At the end of the nineteenth century, when this primitive community lost its cohesion through the gradual encroachment of an alien modern world and the restored authority of a modernized Church, the art of the saint-maker died out. But in several instances local craftsmen have been encouraged to revive the old tradition. Of these José Dolores López, the grandson of the maker of the Cordova Chariot of Death (p. 6), is the most widely known. In his Garden of Eden (p. 10) López employs the traditional joinery, and in the flourishing Tree of Knowledge, an inventive system of pegged construction of his own. But the conception of the scene in terms of movable, separate props and protagonists is theatrical, probably inspired by *Adam and Eve*, a play from the Old Testament cycle of the religious folk theater originally introduced by the Franciscans to convert the Indians.

MARGARET MILLER

Both photographs and santos reproduced in these pages are from the Taylor Museum unless otherwise noted.





Cristo Nazareno (The Man of Sorrows), 38½ inches high.



Cristo Nazareno, 45½ inches high.

Opposite page: *The Chariot of Death, Cordova, New Mexico. Height 51½ inches. The conception of Death in a chariot is as old as the Gnostic sects of the first years of the Christian era. In New Mexico, the classical chariot, represented as a colonial cart, was drawn through the streets in the Penitente processions perhaps as a reminder of the inexorable words of Christ, "except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5).*

This version is considered the finest work of the entire region. Here the implacable figure of Death is as fragile and inflexible as bone, but the powerful magnified hands emphasize the deadly accuracy of his aim. According to an oral tradition of the region, the arrow was set in the bow at the beginning of the procession and finally released into the crowd by the bumping of the cart, marking the man who was to take the part of Christ (or Judas according to some) in the ceremonies.



The personal directness and emotional intensity of the Penitente rites were the heart of this self-sustaining folk survival of Franciscanism. But these rites were reserved for Lent, special saints' days and solemn occasions such as the funerals of the brethren or members of their families. The rest of the year was devoted,

Left: San Ysidro Labrador (St. Isidore the Laborer), 23¼ inches high.

Below: Mesa country, San Miguel County, New Mexico. Photograph Bureau of Agricultural Economics, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

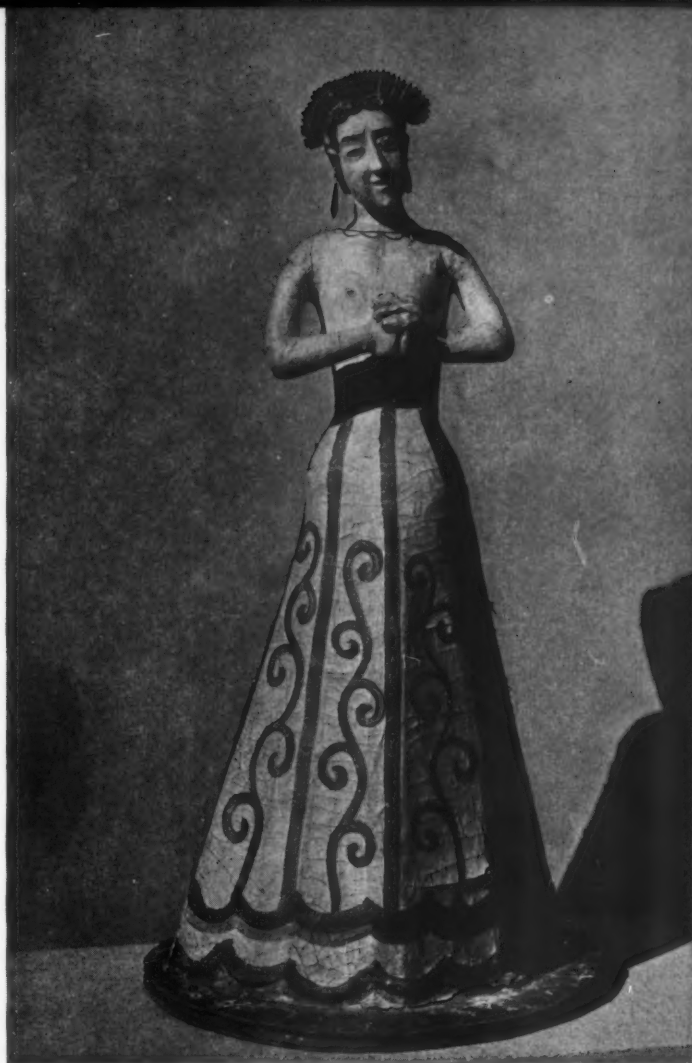


ideally, to fostering a spirit of fraternal reconciliation in the community. The Penitente hymns and the religious folk-songs and folk theater of the region are marked by the same dignified, unworldly devoutness personified in the bultos of St. Isidore, the patron of farmers, (opposite page) and the Holy Family (below right).

Right: *Nuestra Señora de los Dolores* (Our Lady of Sorrows), 42 inches high.

Below left: *Santiago* (St. James the Great), 13 inches high.

Below right: *Santa Familia* (The Holy Family), maximum height 18 inches.



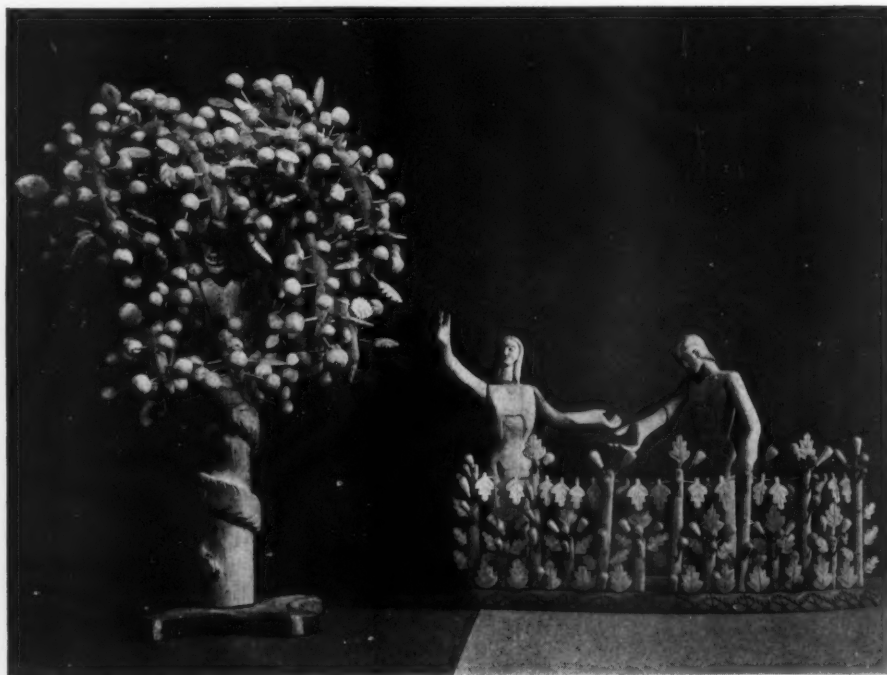


Santa Catalina de Siena (St. Catherine of Siena).



Santa Niña (The Virgin as a Child).

Below: José Dolores López, The Garden of Eden. Lent by Mrs. Michael Hare.





Above: Penitente Church, Velarde, New Mexico. Ernest King, photographer.

Below: Main Altar, Cordova, New Mexico. Mitchell A. Wilder, photographer.



The Paintings of Morris Hirshfield

Born in Russia-Poland in 1872, Morris Hirshfield began to paint sixty-seven years later, alone and unguided in Brooklyn, where he still lives. It was at a moment when the great public was beginning to discover that Dodger-ville's most creative proclivity was baseball. Two years later, in 1939, when Dodger art was being feverishly acclaimed and conversely Brooklyn art coolly disclaimed, Hirshfield's paintings first entered the field of appreciation. This event took place at the Museum of Modern Art when his initial two oils were included in an exhibit sponsored by the Museum's Advisory Committee and titled *Unknown American Painters*.*

To the Museum, then, it falls quite naturally now to present Hirshfield in his first one-man show. Furthermore, he is repre-

*Two Hirshfields, *Girl in a Mirror* and *Tiger*, were purchased by the Museum in 1941.

sented by all of his work to date, thirty paintings. A display of every picture a painter has made offers an unusual opportunity to study his *oeuvre*, but it is an undertaking wrought with great risk to his reputation. The strikingly creative character and finality of statement apparent in these pictures, however, justify the procedure here.

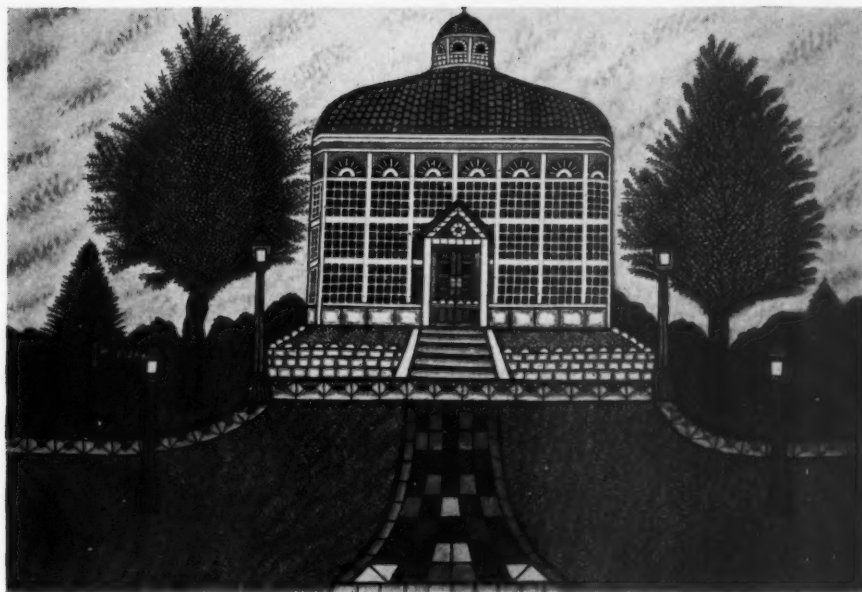
A brief review of Hirshfield's life discloses that, aside from a gratifying childhood experience in wood carving, he was engaged for the most part in the usual pursuits of a mundane existence. Venturing to America when quite young, he married shortly after, spent the next two decades in the cloak and suit industry, and later became a slipper manufacturer. Ill health forced him to discontinue business at the age of sixty-five.

With hands idle for the first time in his life, he turned to painting. An immediate



Morris Hirshfield, *Girl with Pigeons*, 1942. 30 by 40 inches.

Morris Hirshfield, *College Ground*, 1941. 28 x 40 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches.



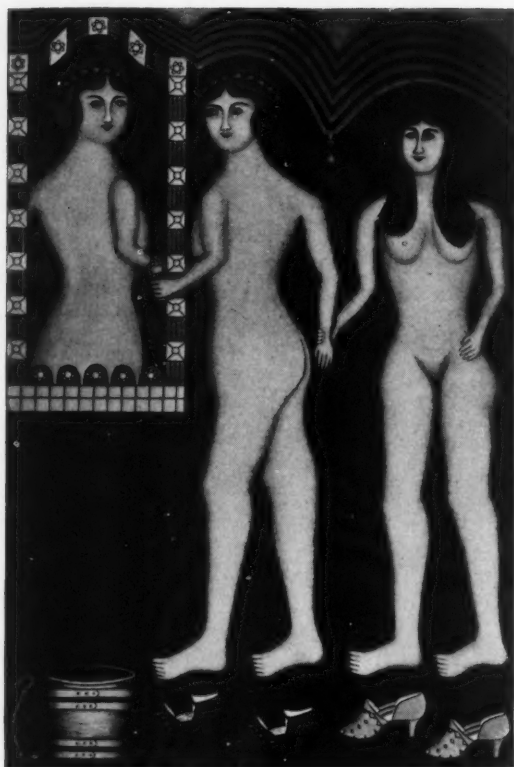
environment out of sympathy with this new aspiration, the stringency of a reduced household budget, and lack of formal training in art were oppositions outweighed and obstacles surmounted by the insistent nature of his desire to paint.

His career as an artist began unostentatiously. Although he bought colors and brushes at a nearby store, the canvases for his first works were two paintings from his own walls, lingering possessions of his affluent days. After many long months of slow, methodical work, the original pictures were virtually buried under hundreds of thousands of minute, carefully applied brushstrokes, though a significant detail of each painting was carefully retained.* Two years of struggle with the demons of frustration were to be endured before he reached the mark he had set—to achieve a result he believed entirely literal, a precision “better than the camera can do.”

*The face of a girl in one and a lion-statuettes in the other.

These works he titled *Beach Girl* and *Angora Cat*. Their fierce and hypnotic originality indicates that the old paintings underneath merely served as a bridge by which he crossed into the world of art. As for the verity he thought he obtained, the memory-image and his fancy are persistent enough to infuse his pictures with a magical quality whereby they look real only to himself. The fascination for the observer lies elsewhere: in the very distance between his newly created world and that of everyday reality. Hirshfield now painted a third picture, *Tailormade Girl*, but this time he started from a blank canvas and has continued to do so in his subsequent paintings.

Contributing to the singular quality in Hirshfield's art are many extraordinary elements. Among them his occupational and racial backgrounds and his personal life unconsciously play a vital rôle. In his paintings, for example, he may without intention represent the profile of a female figure in terms of a dressmaker's dummy or, reverting to the



Morris Hirshfield, Inseparable Friends, 1941. 60 x 40 inches.

technique of the cutting room, draw the outlines of his main forms on separate papers and then fit and trace them, pattern-like, upon his canvas. Racial reminiscences are sometimes to be seen in the nature of his color, which corresponds to that of colors used in ceremonial objects, and in various motifs that are in effect transmuted Hebraic symbols.

Response to the art of a painter is not dependent on an awareness of the play of intimate details in his life, but Hirshfield's very being is so significantly worked into his painting that a study of it from the psychological approach disclosed many facets which

add immeasurably to comprehension and sensitive evaluation. With many artists this factor is generalized and diffused so that only an abstraction of it is given, but with Hirshfield it is exceedingly direct. It is here, where he does not intend to, that he paints realism, though not the realism of outer representation but that of the inner life of the individual. Hence one may readily perceive, even interpret his pictorial language, which consists of emotion-images, subliminal references and symbols.

The validity or importance of investigating in his pictures intangible components like the occupational, religious and psychological ones may be questioned. Still, they are an intrinsic part of the highly individual substance of his art, an art in which the subconscious clamors with pristine force for conversion into esthetic form, and the nature of these elements is synonymous with that of the eventual picture. Since they furnish the pictorial logic by which Hirshfield creates his violently convincing paintings, these various issues will be specifically discussed in the experimental analyses that will accompany several of the pictures in the exhibition and to which the visitor may wish to refer.*

Hirshfield believes passionately in his work. The longer he continues, the larger and more complex his compositions become. Whether his later efforts surpass the earlier in intensity, whether it is his command of pictorial means that has increased, or simply his confidence, the methods of this compulsive artist, as a clue to those of others, may best be examined in the work itself, now shown in its entirety.

SIDNEY JANIS

* The Hirshfield exhibition which opens June 22 will be directed by Mr. Janis and will include visual and written analyses of several of the pictures.

Museum Notes

GARDEN

Beginning May 18 a cold buffet luncheon and afternoon tea will again be served in the sculpture garden of the Museum. The hours for lunch will be half past twelve to half past two, and tea will be served from four o'clock to a quarter past six. The bar will be open again to serve beer and wines of North and South America. The price of the buffet lunch will be one dollar; afternoon tea will be thirty-five cents. Wine, which will be sold by glass and by carafe as well as by the bottle, and beer will be moderately priced. Members may make reservations for tables for lunch by calling the Membership Department before twelve o'clock on the day for which the reservation is made.

MEMBERSHIP

Memberships taken out during the summer months are automatically post-dated October 1, although membership privileges begin at once. The gift of a membership makes an excellent graduation present.

EXHIBITIONS

RELIGIOUS FOLK ART OF THE SOUTHWEST: April 27-June 13. First floor. See pages 1-11.

THE MAY DAY SKETCH BOOK OF DIEGO RIVERA: April 30-June 13. Forty-four watercolors made in Moscow on the occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of the October Revolution are being exhibited on the first floor along with a group of Soviet posters of the present war and the early 1930's.

FIVE PANELS BY STANLEY SPENCER: May 11-May 27. Auditorium gallery. Two triptychs and three other panels by one of the finest and more original contemporary English painters include a group of oils illustrating the arts of peace, originally executed as poster designs for the Empire Marketing Board.

WAR CARICATURES BY HOFFMEISTER AND PEEL: May 11-July 11. First floor. Recent anti-Nazi caricatures by two leading cartoonists of Czechoslovakia who are now in this country. In its ironic wit, brilliant use of color and montage this work ranks among the finest graphic art that this war has yet produced.

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY: ITS FUNCTION AND PURPOSE:

June 1-September 19. The Museum's Armed Services Program in active cooperation with the American Occupational Therapy Association has planned this exhibition in response to many requests for practical information about therapy. The exhibition will define this type of therapeutic work, describe the qualifications and training necessary for its practice and indicate where such training can be obtained. Art works and craft objects made under the supervision of therapists will be supplemented by photographic material illustrating the role of occupational therapy in the First World War and its potentialities today.

THE PAINTINGS OF MORRIS HIRSHFIELD: June 22 to August 1. First floor. See pages 12-14.

AIR-AGE GEOGRAPHY: June 29-October 17. A sequel to the 1942 *Road to Victory* exhibition will be the major exhibition of the summer season and occupy the entire second floor.

The airplane has revolutionized modern geography just as decisively as it has altered the strategy and tactics of modern warfare. An understanding of the basic factors of air-age geography is essential to the winning of the war and making a successful peace.

In a series of lucid, dramatic sequences the new exhibition will show how the shrinkage of the modern world through air-routes has brought the population centers of the globe closer together and greatly altered the geographical relations between nations and the larger regions of the world. The significance of these changes will be emphasized through photo-murals, maps, globes and models illustrating the basic interdependence of geography, transportation and ways of life.

FAVORITES IN MODERN ART: May 11-June 20. Young People's Gallery. Paintings and sculpture made by New York high school students to express their reactions to favorite works in the Collection of the Museum.

UNDERSTANDING MODERN ART: June 22-July 25. Young People's Gallery. The annual exhibition of work done in the Museum's Saturday morning classes for New York high school students.

Circulating Exhibitions: MAY—JUNE

THIS LIST IS PUBLISHED FOR THE CONVENIENCE OF THE MUSEUM'S NON-RESIDENT MEMBERS WHO MAY WISH TO SEE ITS CIRCULATING EXHIBITIONS

<i>City</i>	<i>Institution</i>	<i>Exhibition</i>	<i>Dates</i>
BALTIMORE, MD.	Baltimore Museum of Art	John Flannagan	May 21-June 13
BENNINGTON, VT.	Bennington College	Modern Architecture for Modern Schools	May 8-May 22
" "	" "	Ancestral Sources of Modern Painting	May 23-June 13
BETHLEHEM, PA.	Lchigh University	18 Artists from 9 States	May 3-May 24
BIRMINGHAM, ALA.	Birmingham Art Club	Army Illustrators	May 7-May 28
CHAPEL HILL, N. C.	University of North Carolina	Wartime Housing	May 13-June 3
" " "	" " "	Picasso's "Seated Man," 1911	June 14-June 27
CHICAGO, ILL.	Arts Club of Chicago	20th Century Portraits	May 4-May 31
COLUMBIA, S. C.	Dreher High School	Camouflage Slides	May 19-May 26
COOPERSTOWN, N. Y.	New York State Historical Association	Camouflage for Civilian Defense I	May 11-June 1
DENTON, TEXAS	Texas State College for Women	Camouflage Slides	May 4-May 11
DENVER, COLO.	Denver Art Museum	Art from Fighting China	May 11-June 1
EAST LANSING, MICH.	Michigan State College	Emotional Design in Painting	May 14-May 28
FT. WAYNE, IND.	Ft. Wayne Art School and Museum	Art of Australia	May 12-May 31
FREDERICK, MD.	Hood College	European & American Paintings	May 11-May 25
MANCHESTER, N. H.	Currier Gallery of Art	Henri Rousseau	May 14-June 4
" " "	" " "	Children in England Paint	June 5-June 26
MILWAUKEE, WIS.	Milwaukee Art Institute	"Yank" Illustrates the War	May 14-June 4
MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.	University of Minnesota	Camouflage for Civilian Defense II	May 1-May 22
" " "	" " "	War Posters Today II	May 1-May 22
PITTSBURGH, PA.	Carnegie Institute	Brazil Builds	May 15-June 5
PORTLAND, ORE.	Portland Art Museum	The Arts in Therapy	June 19-July 14
POUGHKEEPSIE, N. Y.	Vassar College	8 Sculptors and Their Drawings	May 9-May 30
ST. JAMES, MD.	St. James School	Masters of Photography	May 9-May 30
ST. LOUIS, MO.	City Art Museum	Road to Victory (large)	May 14-June 14
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF.	California Palace of the Legion of Honor	Children in England Paint	May 6-May 27
" " "	California Palace of the Legion of Honor	Furniture Design Today	May 12-June 30
" " "	California Palace of the Legion of Honor	20th Century Portraits	June 14-July 12
" " "	M. H. deYoung Memorial Museum	Art from Fighting China	June 11-July 14
SEATTLE, WASH.	University of Washington	Faces and Places in Brazil	May 12-May 22
SWEET BRIAR, VA.	Sweet Briar College	Our Leading Watercolorists	May 16-June 6
TULSA, OKLA.	Philbrook Art Museum	New Silk Screen Color Prints I	May 3-May 24
WELLESLEY, MASS.	Wellesley College	The Wooden House in America	Apr. 30-May 21
SECONDARY SCHOOL EXHIBITIONS			
LAWRENCEVILLE, N. J.	Lawrenceville School	Wartime Posters	May 3-May 17
MANHATTAN, KANSAS	Kansas State College	Wartime Posters II	May 7-May 21
MILWAUKEE, WIS.	Milwaukee-Downer College	Functions of the Camera	Apr. 30-May 14
VENTNOR CITY, N. J.	Ventnor Avenue School	Wartime Posters	May 27-June 10

